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Postcolonial cosmology or postcolonial critique? A response to Kaarel Piirimäe

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It was with considerable pleasure that I read Kaarel Piirimäe’s words of praise for my *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands*. I know—as Piirimäe himself confesses in his review—that he is not a very sympathetic reader of this kind of work, generally speaking, so I was all the more gratified that he found himself broadly in sympathy with my reading of the Soviet Union as a colonial power and that, whatever his minor reservations, he found the generosity to call the book “required reading for anyone interested in the Soviet legacy in the Baltic countries.”

I am convinced that most of Piirimäe's minor reservations are, in fact, minor misreadings of local points in my book. For present purposes, however, I think I will desist from explaining in detail how my point was not that the Soviet project entailed an "equal treatment of men and women", but rather that the Soviet state made "efforts to advance" such equal treatment; or how my point was not a general claim that "cultural abundance was available only for manual workers", but about a specific kind of cultural abundance typified by kolkhoz trips to theatres. I do indeed write that "girls and boys cease to exist, pioneers and students take their places"—but the context of its appearance belongs to a description of Madis Kõiv's childhood recollection, in which Kõiv describes the alienating effects produced by the new Soviet school books, translated from Russian and full of happy young pioneers (in lieu of the happy girls and boys of pre-Soviet school books). So I was describing not Soviet-era realities, but rather a child's feeling of alienation—filtered, of course, through specific practices of storytelling and remembering. I regret that I did not make this clear enough for readers like Piirimäe.

And yet there are several more substantive points we might profitably take up from Piirimäe's review and consider at greater length, in the spirit of scholarly dialogue. And, again, I am grateful to Kaarel Piirimäe for his review and to the editors at Methis for this opportunity.

1. Does post-colonial studies adhere to a cosmology?

The first of these more substantive points regards the general question of post-colonial approaches and their potential role within Soviet studies. In his review, Kaarel Piirimäe makes some very strong claims. For example, he offers the view of an "ordinary historian" that postcolonialism "is not scholarship but an effort, a successful one, to bring the anti-colonial struggle into the heart of the former metropolises, and therefore primarily a political, not a scholarly, endeavour". I think Piirimäe is too dismissive here of other scholarly modes.

To start with some basic points, it is useful to remind ourselves that whenever we talk about "postcolonial critical theory" or "postcolonial theory", we are dealing with a huge body of work which includes myriad different approaches—some of them indeed politically attuned, some others written for scholarly audiences, some of them based on archival research, some on oral histories, some on readings of literature, film or media texts. Very often readers might see an author focused upon presenting or explicating a specific phenomenon, but without striving for any broader generalization. And yet it must be said that narrow research without the generalizing impulse is less likely to reach general audiences. Thus those interested in postcolonial approaches are more likely to click on an article like "Of mi-

micry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse” (one of Homi Bhabha’s most widely read texts), rather than on “From Cybermohalla to Trickster City: Writing from the margins of Delhi” (a recent article by Lipi Biswas Sen in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*)—unless, that is, the reader is specifically interested in Delhi or in the Cybermohalla project (the abstract of this article, by the way, looks really interesting!). For these reasons, it is easy for casual observers, attracted to the most generalizing articles of the field, to get a misleading sense of the general tendencies of what is, after all, an enormous field of postcolonial inquiry.

For the reasons of the vastness of the field, I generally refer in my book to “postcolonial studies” (thus “Soviet postcolonial studies”), not to postcolonial “theory”. I myself use the phrase “postcolonial theory” only a few times in the book and then referring specifically to certain attitudes that, as I argue, would profit from critical revision. For example, my book argues that “Postcolonial critique developed as a critique of domination that was specifically capitalist; one of its preconditions has been an understanding of imperialism as connected to the emergence of capitalism” (Annus 2018, 87). Following from this, I suggest that the link between imperialism and capitalism needs to be revisited, since imperial and colonial attitudes are not limited to capitalist economies alone, and I point out that such a theoretical correlation has hindered the development of postcolonial approaches in analyses of Soviet societies.

Piirimäe’s dissatisfaction with certain aspects of my book is something that he attributes largely to postcolonial theory itself. For Piirimäe, “This is in many respects an admirable book [. . .] It suffers only from the ambition of postcolonialism to offer a kind of total interpretive paradigm and the author’s wish to engage with that cosmology at all cost.” I must confess that this is not how I understand my own relation to postcolonial paradigms and I would offer, as an example of my own critical relation to postcolonial studies, my revisionist attitude towards fundamental postcolonial categories—including, for example, an effort to completely rethink the use of concepts like the “colonizer” and the “colonized”. Leaving aside my own relation to this field of thought, however, I argue in the book that postcolonial paradigms don’t have the closure of dogma (or they shouldn’t) and they require a responsible revision by each scholar according to the exigencies of the material at hand and the disposition of the scholar him- or herself:

[. . .] a scholar sympathetic to postcolonial paradigms still has to formulate his or her own scholarly approach to fit a specific scholarly inquiry. This book, in the wake of recent developments in critical thought, suggests a critical model, under the umbrella of postcolonial studies that would combine a number of different philosophical approaches. (Annus 2018, 19)

So for me—and surely not only for me—postcolonial approaches do not prescribe a methodology and I am surprised to read of it described as a distinct cosmology. My book puts it this way: “Postcolonial studies, as it has developed through recent decades, has thought extensively about cultural ruptures and unhomely encounters, about the ensuing strategies of accommodation and hybridisation of identities, and about the ways colonial power-structures condition subject positions” (Annus 2018, 1–2). The framework of postcolonial studies provides a certain critical impulse, it orients scholars towards certain questions—such as ethnic tensions and cultural hybridisations, for example. Postcolonial studies also provides a basic, working vocabulary that can be extended or overwritten according to one’s specific research aims. I call my own approach “an effort in multidimensional critical thinking” (36), one heavily indebted not only to postcolonial studies, but also to wider developments in cultural and political philosophy—and, in consequence, hopefully resisting reduction to one single “total interpretive paradigm”.

2. Nonconsensual control or manufacture of consent?

Let us consider another important topic that Piirimäe introduces: the manufacture of consent for the Soviet regime. I write that the Soviet Union “did not necessarily govern its borderlands through non-consensual control, but it instead manufactured consent through complex strategies of rule, including various kinds of systemic violence” (47). Kaarel Piirimäe counters this argument with the story of his grandfather, who, like many others after the 1949 mass deportations, was given a choice between Siberia and the kolkhoz; his grandfather, together with others, chose the latter. It was not much of a choice, as I think we can all agree. Such blunt-force cases suggest to Piirimäe the unsuitability of “fancy language”—the unsuitability, that is, of concepts such as the manufacture of consent. I think Piirimäe is too hasty here in discarding a useful concept merely because it seems not to fit such instances as his grandfather’s (forced) choice.

Let me briefly summarize my argument: I suggest that “the Soviet regime could not have survived through the decades by nonconsensual control alone” (36). The next question thus follows logically: how then was the consent produced? I see the manufacture of consent as a process which remained uncompleted in the Baltic corner of the USSR (150). According to the model proposed in the book, the initial consent in the Baltics was produced by coercive means; I claim that we should “understand consent not in opposition to violence, but rather within the framework of systemic violence” (39). I see manufactured consent as conditional, or as I put it, “‘consent but not quite’, consent with a difference—consent until dissent becomes a possibility” (39). Thus the important part here is the process: this process was

initiated in the formerly independent Baltic States through coercion. Acceptance of the kolkhoz system was indeed forcibly imposed upon people, including Piirimäe's grandfather, but it was also the first of many steps in a process that came to produce, to "manufacture", something like consent, as it was then followed by voting in meetings, then children joining Communist youth organizations, and parents sitting in school concerts where children sang odes to Stalin. This is "consent but not quite". People were subjected to an ongoing process of manufacturing consent, and many produced supportive noises to the regime when it was expected of them.

Piirimäe also points out—and quite correctly—that a certain variance emerges in my book on these matters. From one perspective, the book deploys notions like "manufacture of consent", while at the same time there are examples of nonconsensual control in great abundance—Soviet-era mass deportations are a common example of nonconsensual control appearing in the book. Yet the book is dealing with different political aims and impulses, different policies and different modes of implementation developing over the many years of Soviet rule.

Piirimäe refers to early developments in Soviet studies, in which the "totalitarian" research paradigm came to be heavily contested by revisionists. It is indeed useful to keep in mind that Soviet studies have evolved significantly past its earlier totalitarian model—in fact so significantly past it that some of the claims of the revisionists, who refuted the totalitarian model, have themselves also been refuted in turn (Hoffmann 2003, 2–6). Extreme coercion is still—or is once again—regarded as the major characteristic of Stalinist rule; David Hoffmann defines Stalinism through "policies characterized by extreme coercion employed for the purpose of economic and social transformation" (Hoffmann, forthcoming). Soviet rule included many controversies and internal inconsistencies; it evolved and changed substantially over its decades; it included a chronic mismatch between its policies and its shared practices. I do indeed make the strong claim in my book that Soviet rule had to manufacture consent and could have not survived its many decades on nonconsensual control alone. But this is far from contesting the sometimes systematic and sometimes random deployment of nonconsensual control and extreme state violence that characterised Stalinist rule.

It might also be useful to remind ourselves, as my book constantly tries to do, that Soviet rule in Russia and Soviet rule in the Baltics were distinct in many ways, and so likewise was the popular response to it. Thus scholarly claims about the regime based on Russian materials can be quite ill suited for describing the Baltic experience—and, correspondingly, work with Baltic materials does not necessarily suit Soviet studies interpretive paradigms that developed primarily from Russian material. To give one example from archival materials: a 1937 letter, addressed to

the Central Committee of the Communist Party, includes urgent complaints against the groundless arrests made by provincial bodies of the NKVD. Kh. Ivanova writes: “The women are writing to our dear Stalin, to Yezhov and Vyshinsky, but apparently none of these letters are getting there. They are obviously being destroyed in the localities” (Siegelbaum and Sokolov 2000, 233). While in Russia it was possible to imagine that “dear Stalin” knew nothing of the atrocities committed in the provincial towns, such position would have been quite unlikely in the Stalin-era ethnic Baltic communities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Such discrepancies are among the main reasons why a postcolonial angle seemed especially well suited for the study of the Soviet-era Baltics: the specifics of the Soviet-era Baltic situation, with its ethnic and cultural differences, brought along its own sets of tensions.

3. Back to “sweeping generalizations”?

The third substantive point I would like to take up from Piirimäe’s review regards the specific resistances to coloniality posed by modern nation states and the specific tactics therefore required by any would-be colonizer of a modern nation state. I argue:

To establish a colonial-type political, economic, and cultural order in a developed modern nation-state requires deportations and executions on a massive scale, the devastation of existing social and political structures, and the eradication of the former governing classes, including a significant part of the cultural, military, and economic elite. (Annus 2018, 101)

My point here being that a colonial-type order cannot be imposed upon a modern nation-state without remarkable destruction and violence. Piirimäe calls this “a sweeping generalization” and a result of the “author’s wish to engage with [postcolonial] cosmology at all cost”. This is indeed a generalization, but one justified by the context of the massive violence that accompanied the establishment of Soviet rule—not only in the Baltics, but also elsewhere in the Soviet Union and all over the Eastern bloc, as my book laid out in its earlier pages. I continue with the claim that such a regime needs for its sustenance a huge control apparatus. This became possible in the advanced phase of modernization, where massive resettlement operations and the establishment of elaborate surveillance systems involved a complicated apparatus of bureaucracy and well-developed logistics of suppression (101).

Piirimäe extracts from this a claim that massive resettlement operations necessitated an advanced phase of modernization and he reminds his reader of premodern mass resettlements in ancient Mesopotamia. Yet my claim was not

about making an absolute connection between modernization and mass resettlements, but rather that the modern control apparatus, with its well-developed systems of bureaucracy, logistics, and surveillance, became an integral part of how Soviet-era resettlements were organized. It had, with modern technologies of rule, become possible to compose lists, collect and transport tens of thousands of people thousands of kilometres away—and to do so in quite speedy ways; this modern efficiency was a necessary part of the effort to establish a regime of coloniality in the Baltics.

In short, Piirimäe’s review—and my book, as I would like to think—gives us an occasion to consider some important questions regarding the disciplinary inclinations of postcolonial studies, questions regarding the complex relation of manufacture of consent to systemic violence, and questions regarding the precise part played (or not played) by modernity, as such, in character of the mass resettlements of the Soviet era. Students and scholars of this material will, I hope, find the time to read my book and Piirimäe’s gracious review and come to their own conclusions.

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